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THE SORBS OF LUSATIA

AMONG the national minorities of Europe the Sorbs of Lusatia occupy in two respects a special position. They are a racial group which lacks a mother-state, being entirely settled within the bounds of the German Empire: but they are also what the Germans call a *Restvolk*, a last fragment of the Polabian Slavs, and as such are an individual national group, which has sunk legally and politically to the status of a national minority. A short survey of their history shows that they are a "national minority" only according to external indications and the modern terminology which has grown up in the period of international protection of minorities. Their present situation is characterised by the fact that they enjoy neither this international protection, nor any legally assured status in the German Reich.

The Sorbs are the last of the Polabian or Elbian Slavs. Till the coming of Christianity and wars of conquest during the succeeding Carolingian and Saxon period (9th to 13th century) these Slavs of the Elbe formed three tribes—the Weletans or Lutizians, on the Baltic coast between Elbe and Oder, the Bodrizians or Obotrites, in what are now Mecklenburg and Holstein, and the Sorbs or Wends, in the modern Lusatia between Elbe and Oder. It is with the last surviving fragment of the latter group that we are concerned.

The first two of these tribes and the greater part of the latter after long centuries of defence and resistance, fell a prey to the process of Christianisation and colonisation under the Carolingian (800–918), Saxon (919–1024) and Franconian (1024–1125), dynasties, and were assimilated by Germanism. Their downfall was hastened by the fact that the Weletans and Obotrites had not yet formed a well knit state of their own, but were loosely grouped together on federal lines. The permanent aggression of the German conquerors also prevented the Sorbs from achieving independence or the military power which might have guaranteed their existence. The cause of their defeat was not the incapacity to form a state of their own, as later German historians maintained, for the Federative system of the Polabian tribes was in full accord with the individualism of the Slavs. This form of state had all the preconditions of further development, as is seen from the history of all other Western Slav nations. The decisive factors that wrought their political downfall were (1) the geographical, or geopolitical, situation of the Polabian Slavs, which exposed them to most powerful attacks of the German offensive; (2) the federalist basis of their political structure, which

could not resist the onslaught of centralised German Imperialism ; (3) the very inadequate co-operation between the different groups and their consequent military weakness.

The struggles of the Polabian Slavs with the Germans had both a negative and a positive effect. On the one hand two of the Polabian groups and a large portion of the third were wiped out and ceased to be a factor in the political, cultural and national development of this area, even though it did not prove possible to bring about a complete racial and biological assimilative and to assimilate the East Elbe population altogether. For the result which we see today after all these centuries, is not a "German" nation, but a mixed race which finds its most pregnant expression in Prussianism and the Prussian character. The negative results have also persisted right up to the present day, in the sense that 400 years of defensive struggles served as a first barrier to stave off the first onslaught of advancing Germanism from the other Slav peoples east of the Elbe, and thereby contributed to their rise and consolidation, enabling the Poles to form the Piast Kingdom and the Czechs the Great Moravian State.

The Lusatian Sorbs of today only escaped the fate of the other Polabians owing to their geographical situation to the south of the East Elbe area, on the very edge of the territory really contested, and also because they offered less resistance to Christianisation (though those of them to the west of the Elbe went under in the process), and because they had been subjected to the Polish or Moravian states at a time when both had considerable native forces capable of resisting the "Drang nach Osten."

Without some such brief incursion into the historical past the problem of the national minority of today could hardly be understood : but it is of course impossible in the present article to deal with the kindred problem of colonisation beyond the Elbe or even with the social and cultural history of the Sorbs, although this is of special importance for their present position. This is, however, intimately connected with the tendencies and aims of that distant colonial period. The story of the Sorbs as a "people without a history" is unscientific and prompted by political motives, and needs no refutation : that this history is only faintly noticeable, or interpreted on partisan lines in the general European framework, does not mean that the Sorbs have no history, but only that it has been imperfectly written.

Alike from the linguistic and the historical point of view the Sorbs belong to the group of Western Slavs, as do the Poles, Slovaks

and Czechs. Their present territory is smaller than the historical Lusatia, as it existed under Charles IV (1316-1378) and comprises an area of about 7,500 km., stretching longitudinally for 150 km. from a point about 50 km. south of Berlin to about 20 km. from the Czechoslovak border, and attaining from West to East a width of about 50 km. According to the official census of 1925 the Sorbs of Lusatia numbered 72,000, divided between Saxony (Saxon "Oberlausitz") and Prussia (Prussian "Oberlausitz" in Provinz Schlesien and "Niederlausitz" in Provinz Brandenburg). A private census carried out in 1924, though not officially authorised, reached the figure of 120,000, even though the greater part of Prussian Lusatia had to be omitted. Without dwelling upon the details of German racial statistics, it may suffice to point out that a knowledge of the German language, which under the circumstances is an absolute matter of course—in other words, in practice, bilingualism—is treated as a recognition of German, and renunciation of Sorb, nationality.

As in the case of all national minorities, the legal position of the Sorbs in education, in the administration and in the Church, is of decisive importance. It is at present determined by two factors—the official attitude of National Socialism to the problem of Minorities in general, and the attitude of the German authorities to the Lusatian problem in particular. First of all, it is to be noted that in the German Reich constitutional protection of minorities inside its borders is only provided for under paragraph 113 of the Weimar Constitution of 11 August, 1919, but that this was regarded not as a positive right, but as a direction for special minority legislation, which has never come into being. The National Socialist régime has announced—in place of the Weimar Constitution, which still exists formally—an unwritten constitutional law, which lays down and alters the "constitution" according to the requirements of the State. What value article 113 possesses, is not clear: it certainly is put into effect as little now as formerly. But the German Reich is not bound by rules of international protection of minorities, so that the Lusatian Sorbs occupy a specially unfavourable position among the minorities of Europe. Neither the National Socialist party programme nor the authoritative pronouncements of its Leader take up any general attitude on the question of minorities. The former puts in a word for Germans abroad (*das Auslandsdeutschtum*), from the angle of "German community of race" (*Volksgemeinschaft*), while Adolf Hitler has in quite general terms repudiated the idea of future Germanisation. No special minority law exists for the Sorbs, and

there is no legal basis for the regulation of their cultural and national status.

The result of this lack of any legal basis is that all cultural requirements and demands of the Sorbs are treated from an *exclusively political* point of view. The practice of the educational and administrative authorities is in direct conflict with Adolf Hitler's denial of any idea of Germanisation. There seems to be a tendency to maintain that the Sorbs are neither a national group (*Volksgruppe*), because their partially bilingual character makes them part of the German cultural community, nor a national minority, because they have nowhere a mother-nation or state, but only live inside the German State.

The consequence of this fiction in the field of education is that instruction in the mother tongue, which is provided in Saxon Upper Lusatia in the school plan, is being more and more abandoned. As there is no scientific provision for the training of Sorb teachers in the Training Colleges, and as students in the Sorb language are discouraged, the number of teachers capable of teaching in the mother tongue is steadily diminishing. Moreover, numerous Sorb teachers are employed in purely German districts, while in schools attended by 60-90 per cent. of Sorbs, German teachers are appointed and the curriculum is becoming increasingly German. All representations and complaints addressed to the central school authorities by the Sorb cultural organisations, have been disregarded. A memorandum on the position of the Sorbs, addressed in July, 1935, to the Chancellor, and containing suggestions for its improvement, has hitherto remained unanswered. As a result, about 6,000 out of the 8,000 Sorb school children (or 75 per cent.) remain without any teaching in their mother tongue, while the remaining 2,000 are very inadequately taught. It is to be presumed that the responsible leaders do not approve of such injustice, and it can only be hoped that the subordinate authorities will be brought to put into effect Adolf Hitler's own words.

Ecclesiastical conditions in the Reich are so acute, that neither the Catholic Church, to which about 15,000 Lusatian Sorbs belong, nor the Evangelical Church, to which the remaining majority belongs, can do justice to the linguistic and cultural needs of a national minority. In the latter there has always prevailed a Germanising current, though it should be added that it is less strong among the adherents of the Confessional Church. But as the Protestant pastors in Sorb territory are almost exclusively German (in Prussia there are only five or six Sorb clergy) or are adherents of

National Socialism, it is impossible to speak of a Sorb cultural mission through the medium of the Church. In Saxon Upper Lusatia there are still twenty Sorb Protestant parishes, served by Sorb clergy : but the services are held in both languages, and some parishes are already becoming Germanised.

The new principles of provincial and communal administration do not entirely exclude minority representation, but render them dependent on the decisions of the National Socialist Party organs (NSDAP). As the administration, down to the smallest village unit, follows exclusively Nazi lines, there are no means of assuring minority interests even where a Sorb adherent of the party may chance to sit in such a body. From the higher and middle posts the Sorbs are virtually excluded, since these are filled only by Germans and members of the National Socialist party. Thus there is not a single Sorb school inspector, still less a Landrat, Amtshauptmann or Regierungspräsident, and in the field of justice not a single district judge or higher official.

The Lusatian Sorbs have created an organisation of their own, consisting of cultural societies, which for some years after the War were represented by a People's Council (*Volksrat*), and at present by the " Domowina " League, which is also their central organ. Its existence is gravely endangered by the principles and political aims of the authoritative National Socialist régime : for it presses for the absorption of Sorb societies in the corresponding German and National Socialist bodies, as a result of which their independence and special national character would be bound to disappear. It has not yet been finally decided, how far this tendency is to be pushed : but its direction is clear from the Statute which the authorities have themselves drawn up and presented to the " Domowina," to the effect that it may no longer be described as " Zwjazk tužiskich Serbow " (League of Lusatian Sorbs), but as " Bund wendischsprechender Deutscher " ! If they should refuse to comply with this official order, their organisation is to be dissolved, and all Sorb societies incorporated with National Socialist organisations.

The use of Sorb national emblems and colours is forbidden. Their own daily paper, *Serbske Nowiny*, now in its ninety-fifth year, is under repeated threat of confiscation, in case of its dealing with minority questions. For instance, it dare not write that the Lusatian Sorbs are a minority or belong to the Western Slavs ; it may not point out distinctions between Sorb and German " Volkstum " ; and reports on lectures or meetings of the " Domowina "—which of course cannot be held without notification

of the subject and names of speakers and sanction of the political authorities—can none the less not be published until they have been submitted to the Censor. On placards, entrance cards, programmes, and so forth the German language must be used : Sorb may, it is true, be added, but then only in the second place.

All these measures and threats and the employment of strong German resources to denationalise the Sorbs, only serve to demonstrate that in the political conceptions of National Socialism a Sorb minority question does exist. It is true that it is officially denied that such measures in school, administration and public life are directed against the survival of the national minority. Appeal is made to the principle of authoritarian conduct of the State, which can only permit the existence of an unitary German *Volksgemeinschaft*. The contradiction is too obvious to require special emphasis. As the Sorbs are an entirely isolated group, the only political effect of such contradictions, however, is to provide fresh impetus for denationalisation.

In such circumstances an improvement in their lot is only imaginable in two directions. The one possibility is that the leading political factors renounce their idea of Germanisation and accord to the Sorbs the position that is their due as the last fragment or "Restvolk" of the Polabian Slavs. The other, which could only be considered if the first should remain unrealised, would consist in internationalising the problem, and so giving it a political character. The Sorbs themselves desire a settlement within the Reich, because they regard their problem as one of right and of culture.

SORABICUS.